

“Pruning for Growth” – Pr Jim Sprengle – May 2, 2021 (Fifth Sunday of Easter)

- I. **John 15:1-2** - ¹“I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. ² Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.”
- II. **Some things are not always as they appear.**
 - a. When we first toured our current home as we looked for house to buy, the landscaping really caught my eye.
 - i. I know how hard it can be to have a big lawn to mow – the grass is relentless 😊
 - ii. Looking around, there were well-manicured bushes and shrubs, along with mostly gravel and rock (which seemed low maintenance to me)
 - b. As a few years have gone by, I now see how much pruning and cutting back is needed – and I do not consider it low maintenance anymore!
 - i. Over time, all these little bushes and plants grow and grow – requiring more pruning back and shaping so they don’t go crazy
 - c. But here’s the challenge - when you prune plants, it actually creates a growth response as a reaction – so a cut branch often produces 3-4 buds just below the cut line.
 - d. I read a blogpost about a vineyard owner in California who also has a big job of maintaining and pruning...
 - i. Matthiasson Wines out of Napa, wrote about pruning their vineyards in a newsletter:
 - ii. “Why do we prune? Because if the vine is not pruned it reverts very quickly to its wild nature, climbing everywhere with its long, sinewy trunk and tiny, scraggly bunches of uneven grapes. Every year we need to assess the growth of the vines, and decide whether to prune them back harder, or to let them grow a bit bigger, or return them to the same size and shape they were the year before.”
 - iii. They go on to say that pruning is kind of like art – because individual vines need different cuts to help them grow in the right direction – and it takes knowledge of what is best for each one.
 1. In other words no plant is exactly the same, they each need a custom prune to keep them healthy
 - iv. Also, they explained that the perfect pruning job will allow the branches to grow just right –
 1. If it grows too much it takes away from a full flavor...
 2. If it grows too little, it makes the wine bitter... ¹
 - e. When it comes to plants that are under the care of people, it seems that pruning in the right way is a necessary step to keep them healthy.
- III. **Jesus is in the middle of a long, “red letter”** section of the Gospel of John

- a. A “red letter” part of the Bible means the words of Jesus are being spoken – which in some bibles helps us to pay attention to when our Lord speaks
- b. The disciples, His followers, are listening to Him as He comforts them and prepares them for His death, His Easter resurrection, and eventually His Ascension to be with the Father.
 - i. They are troubled because they don’t want Him to leave them – but He tells them the Holy Spirit will always be a part of their lives.
- c. Then Jesus goes into a long-used example about the vineyard, the grape vines, and how tending them is a lot like God’s connection to us.
- d. You see, even 800 years before Jesus, God used the vineyard as an example of how people walked away from Him...
 - i. Read Isaiah 5:1-7, and you will see a comparison of how God did all the right things for His people, but they only grew wild, bitter grapes
- e. So, what does Jesus say to His followers... to even us today?
 - i. He is the vine, His Father is the gardener caring for those connected to His Son by faith.
 - ii. Those who have no faith produce no fruit and are cut off or disconnected from the vine
 - iii. We who are attached to Him will always have God there to prune away the growth that might lead us the wrong way.
 - iv. God the Father is willing to shape us and keep us healthy by tending us constantly over a long period of time... because...

IV. **We know about producing bitter fruit and wild growth.**

- a. Sure, there are those who are disconnected from faith and Jesus the Vine – wilting away unto death (and finally an eternal separation from God.)
- b. But even Christians who are connected to Jesus by faith can produce bitter fruit and grow as wild offshoots...
- c. It’s just amazing to me how some Christians will grow in wild directions with their sinful life – but these things need to be cut out...
 - i. What better example do we have than adultery as people walk away from their marriage vows and create havoc and destruction in their families...?
 - ii. Or how about those who know Scripture includes “all nations” – but there are many Christians who would NOT be welcoming those of another race or culture?
 - iii. Or some are living the gay lifestyle, they are drinking and drugging excessively, they are into pornography, they gossip incessantly about other peoples’ private matters, they steal and lie and cheat – all the while coming to church every Sunday and failing to see the hypocrisy and well... the bitter grapes being produced... the wild branches
- d. Over time, sin that we allow to abide in our lives can ultimately lead to our faith slowly disconnecting, until we don’t even think about God anymore.

- i. Sins against God that continue without repentance just poisons our faith life over time – and disconnects... rather than strengthening the connection...
- V. **Yet, God is just so steadfast in His love for us!**
 - a. He is willing to put any amount of time and energy into helping us grow in the right direction... developing into fruitful Christians...
 - b. You see, part of being connected to Jesus is that the Father takes the time to prune us for our own health and growth.
 - i. When used for plants the word for “prune” here means to remove unwanted growth,
 - ii. However, in other places in Scripture, it means “to make clean,” “to cleanse,” or “to purify”
 - c. So, God does the work to cleanse and purify us –
 - i. Giving us everything Jesus won on the cross... everything Jesus won for us in the resurrection... and says, “Here, you have this... it’s all yours”
 - ii. God covers us in the baptismal waters and cleans us up from the power of sin and says, “You are Mine now... you are My child, forever connected to Me through the Son and Holy Spirit”
 - iii. God works tirelessly to give us everything we need for our growth in Him – forgiveness, life and salvation.
- VI. **Pruning, or cleansing, can really accelerate our growth in Christ.**
 - a. Just think about how pruning works in your own yard...
 - i. You prune away the shoots on a main branch to keep the energy flowing into certain areas
 - ii. You essentially keep the flow of power and nutrients going to the best parts of the tree or shrub – while cutting away the parts that will only divert the energy
 - b. Our Lord knows when we are using too much energy on the wrong areas of our lives... even those that might lead us astray.
 - c. Instead, He focuses us on His Word, on our Baptisms, and the gift of the Lord’s Supper as we grow stronger in Him
 - d. And when we are stronger in Him, we are able to support the fruit that comes out of that relationship
 - e. Whatever fruit we produce is to God’s glory and work, and might include the fruit of the Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23), sharing Jesus’ name as witnesses to His resurrection power, or any other good thing that God can use for His glory and work.
 - f. Praise be to Him for connecting us by faith to His Son – and for always pruning us for growth that will make a kingdom difference! Amen.

¹ *Tish Harrison Warren, "Pruning, Arranging, and How My Ash Looks," Buttndown Email Blog (2-21-21)*